

Eve in
Exile

Eve in Exile

AND THE RESTORATION
of FEMININITY

Rebekah
Merkle

Rebekah Merkle, *Eve in Exile and the Restoration of Femininity*
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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: The Freedom of Limits</i>	7
I: TWO DISTRACTIONS	15
1. <i>Pretendyville</i>	19
2. <i>The Mythical Fountain of Fulfillment</i>	27
II: ENTER FEMINISM	37
3. <i>Proto-Feminism</i>	43
4. <i>First-Wave Feminism</i>	47
5. <i>Psychotropics and Second-Wave Feminism</i>	57
6. <i>Women Dispossessed</i>	73
7. <i>Excusing Boredom</i>	81
III: WHAT ARE WOMEN DESIGNED FOR?	95
8. <i>Subdue</i>	101
9. <i>Fill</i>	107
10. <i>Help</i>	111
11. <i>Glorify</i>	115
IV: LIVING OUT OUR DESIGN	127
12. <i>The Home</i>	129
13. <i>Subduing Made Real</i>	147
14. <i>Filling Made Real</i>	167
15. <i>Helping Made Real</i>	185
16. <i>Glorifying Made Real</i>	191
<i>Conclusion: Restoring the Paths</i>	197

To Ben, who makes it easy

INTRODUCTION

THE FREEDOM OF LIMITS

You and I have been born into a world that's at war with boundaries. People are kicking over fences and knocking over barricades as far as the eye can see. Sometimes they're knocking over pretend boundaries and sometimes they're just pretending to knock over the permanent, immovable ones, but the one thing that is certain is that our generation here, in this moment, doesn't want to recognize any lines at all. We are a nation that has declared war on virtually all creational distinctives, but one area where the battle is especially hot right now is over the subject of gender. What began several centuries ago as a resentment of "gender stereotypes" has gradually but inexorably escalated to the point where our nation is now offended by the insulting restrictions offered to us by the very fact of gender itself. The Christians, meanwhile, have for two hundred years played their role as the proverbial

frog in the pot, and, as I write this, the pot has very nearly reached boiling point—and we're not really sure how to get out of it now.

In the last twelve months, Bruce Jenner has started calling himself a woman publicly . . . and no one is allowed to argue. Even Siri will correct me if I ask about Bruce Jenner; replies will now only be offered about “Caitlyn” Jenner—and *Glamour* magazine has named him woman of the year. Incidentally, how hilariously insulting is that to all women everywhere? *Glamour* has declared that a middle-aged white man who has been pretending to be a woman for a grand total of one year is already doing it better than all the rest of us.

Of course, the science of the situation is completely set aside in these cases. Let's just run a little thought experiment. Let's say an archaeologist a thousand years down the road finds Bruce's skeleton. Will he conclude that these are the bones of a man or a woman? If they test his DNA, will they find that he is a man or a woman? The answer is patently obvious. God made him a man, and a man he still is—the only thing he's managed to accomplish is that he has badly decoupage himself. But of course no one is allowed to say that. Admit it—you're furtively looking over your shoulder right now to see if you're in trouble for even *reading* what I just said. We're all supposed to go along quietly and pretend that Bruce *actually* managed to change himself from a man to a woman when, of course, he did nothing of the kind.

In my own state, all the school districts have determined that any boy who feels like a girl may use the girls' locker rooms. Nationally, people are yelling for the boycott of *entire states* because of the shockingly insensitive “men” and “women” signs on the doors of the restrooms. The Supreme Court has solemnly climbed up onto its soapbox and announced with a very serious face that marriage no longer has anything to do with gender. Boundaries everywhere are under a full scale assault. People don't want to be bound by their race, by their gender, by anything at all really. They want to be free to soar, untrammled, through a category-less and restriction-less universe.

But this obliterating of lines is not actually leading us into a light-filled, utopian future—we're actually in the middle of watching our culture trip over its own shoelaces and fall unglamorously down the stairs. Chesterton said it best, “Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck. If in your bold creative way you hold yourself free to draw a giraffe with a short neck, you will really find that you are not free to draw a giraffe.”¹ Chesterton is illustrating a very profound truth about the universe, and one that we would do well to thoroughly understand. It *sounds* as if it would be ever so fabulous and freeing to remove boundaries and restrictions, especially if you preface those words with all the right adjectives like “outdated” or

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 64.

“oppressive.” However, we all still intuitively understand that when we step out of our pretend world of what sounds nice and into the world of reality, life doesn’t actually work that way. As a for-instance, imagine a shorter than average, aspiring junior high basketball player who feels that the height advantage enjoyed by other, taller players is unfair. We feel sorry for him—he’s awfully short after all—so we decide to help him out. We can’t do anything about his height, unfortunately, but one thing we definitely *could* do is remove the basketball hoops. Removing the hoops would ensure that height didn’t matter and no one had any unfair advantage over anyone else at all—we have leveled the playing field and made everything truly fair. On the other hand, however kind our intentions were, the only thing we have actually accomplished is that we have destroyed even the *possibility* of playing basketball. We haven’t created additional basketball freedom for anyone, not even the short guy. True freedom lies in the opportunity to pursue excellence, and that opportunity is dependent on the boundaries that define and restrict the entire field of endeavor. Basketball without any hoops or lines on the court isn’t basketball. True freedom *has* to recognize boundaries.

But which ones? We’re Christian women, and we want to live in the way God told us to. We want to be obedient—but we’re looking out over this current playing field and wondering where on earth we’re supposed to stand. Old customs have been knocked sprawling; cultural norms have been overturned. Our daughters are born into the ruins of

what used to be a Christian nation, and we are raising them in the wreckage of the West. What does obedience look like in this madhouse? Some women have resorted to simply looking at the past—finding some era they identify with and trying to re-create *now* what they imagine femininity looked like *then*. So they pick the era that most appeals to them, and they go with it. Maybe it's a Jane Austen life. Maybe a *Little House on the Prairie* life. Maybe a 1950s suburbia life. Other women have just wandered out into the craziness of the present and tried to hang on to their Christianity while still embracing all the changes in women's roles that have happened over the last century in America.

Virtually every cultural boundary surrounding femininity has been knocked down—both the good and the bad. Those lines desperately need to be redrawn . . . because, as Chesterton pointed out, boundaries are essential to freedom. In the same way that the out-of-bounds lines and the fixed and unchanging ten-foot hoops in basketball are what create the court itself, and therefore the ability to play the game, so too the boundaries of gender are what create the possibility of excelling as a woman. The lines define and create the space in which excellence can thrive. But if there are no lines, if Bruce Jenner can win the game that is “being a woman,” I may as well chuck it and decide to be a penguin instead.

The cultural chaos in which we are currently living has caused many to despair, and others to simply shrug and accept the postmodern crazy. But I want to argue that we

are in the *perfect* moment to rethink this whole subject. Because our culture has kicked everything over, since nothing is left but rubble, we actually have the remarkable privilege of being able to think through each line before redrawing it. We can check each boundary against the Scriptures before setting it back in its place. What a blessing! What a huge opportunity! I might not have advocated that our culture burn the house down, but there is no denying that now that the demo has actually happened, it might be nice to start with a blank slate. Rebuilding the house, but this time with better closet space and less ugly linoleum, is actually a great opportunity. We are not living in the eighteenth century, bound by restrictive cultural norms which may or may not be scriptural. We are not stuck trying to tear down unbiblical cultural taboos which hindered many godly women in earlier centuries. We are not, for instance, in the position of being told that our feminine intellects are too fragile to handle the rigors of an education. We are not bumping up against a widespread notion that only the men are capable of critical thought or the ability to do difficult, meaningful work. Our cultural fight over femininity will actually be in the opposite direction—because we most certainly will be bumping up against our own cultural norms. Our fight is going to be with a culture that is antagonistic to the idea of trying to draw *any* lines of at all.

We have a fantastic opportunity in front of us, but we also have a hostile audience. We are in the position of Nehemiah—returning from exile and trying to rebuild the

walls of Jerusalem while the culture outside jeers. But if I could stand in any moment, this is the one I would pick. We have a huge opportunity in front of us, and I hope we can make the most of it. The way of return is open to us—but it will require strong women who are willing to show actual courage if we truly want to bring Eve back from exile.

SECTION ONE

TWO DISTRACTIONS

As we tackle the subject of what biblical femininity looks like, it's important to first identify places where we could conceivably go off the rails. There's no doubt that starting from scratch on this subject is actually a ridiculously huge project, which brings its own attendant potential pitfalls with it. As soon as you bring up the subject of femininity and our desperate need to recover some of it, everyone immediately has their own ideas of how that should look. Or how it should *not* look. And some of those things are valid and legitimate and based on solid arguments and others of them are really not that at all . . . So let's begin by first attempting to eliminate two ways of thinking about the whole subject that are problematic and will actually hinder rather than help in this undertaking.

I.

PRETENDYVILLE

One of the easiest and most obvious ditches to fall into is that of building our expectations on our idealized notions of the past. Many women are disgusted by what they see around them in our culture, and they wish that they lived in an earlier time where gender roles were clearly defined and femininity wasn't despised in the way it is today. They see the earlier societal respect for gender differences as much more creational and biblical, and they feel that if we could only recapture some of what our culture apparently *used* to possess, then we'd be back on the right path again. They look around them and see the charred remains of a spent fire, and they think if we could only blow some of those embers back into flame, then we could be comfortable again.

There are a number of troubles with this approach, however. The first is the unfortunate truth that it tends to be

our imaginations which are captured by some other era, not our intellects, but while we're in the midst of it we confuse the two. Generally speaking, and as unflattering as this may be, when women yearn for some other cultural moment, their knowledge of that era comes from fiction in some form—either films or historical novels. When they lose themselves in a story, they can almost believe that they too live in a world where women were expected to behave like women, where the outfits were ever-so-much better than they are now, and where a wide gulf separated expectations for the men and expectations for the women. We all know the flat feeling that comes after you finish a really great book or a really good film series. If you haven't experienced it lately, you must remember that sensation from when you were a kid. It's like coming back down to earth with a bump, like having someone wake you up with a cold washcloth. Real life just seems insipid. Doubly so if your life actually *is* insipid. If a woman is living a duddy and prosaic life, fiction becomes a form of escapism, and unsurprisingly, she wishes her life were more like the lives of her favorite heroines. This can get all tangled up with her belief that our culture has lost something important and biblical, and all the categories in her head can get blurred and muddled. The argument goes something like this:

The Bible has expectations for gender roles

Our culture doesn't

Earlier cultures did have expectations for gender roles, as

witness all the books in my Goodreads account

Therefore, those earlier cultures were biblical

As a logical argument this is flawed on a number of levels, but again, it is the imagination and not the intellect that is driving this particular train. These women tend to snatch at vestiges of some earlier era and try wistfully to recreate something of that culture within the walls of their own home or on the boards of their Pinterest account. This is not only understandable, it can also (sometimes) be sweet and endearing. But whether it's cute or whether it's dorky, ultimately it's a dangerous distraction from our calling as women.

This particular approach can take many different forms. It could show itself in organizing balls where the girls wear gloves and homemade dresses inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*. It could take the form of grocery shopping while wearing seamed stockings and hair in victory rolls. It might involve moving out into the country and learning to milk cows. It could become an obsession with colonial penmanship or an attempt to bring “thee” and “thou” back into vogue. In fact, it could be a collage of all of the above. None of these things, by the way, am I making up. I have met teenage sisters who wore ankle-length skirts only, who grew their hair out to their waists, and who brushed each other's hair one hundred times every night before bed—their personal, home-brewed version of *Little House on the Prairie*. I've bumped into the thee-and-thou girls. I've